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Chord Electronics Prima Pre-amp and Mezzo Power Amp

by Jimmy Hughes

If Chord have proved one thing, it's that good hi-fi doesn't have to be massively big or massively ugly. The Choral series in particular succeeds in marrying state of the art sonic performance with stylish good looks, small size, and superb build quality. Chord's Blu CD transport and DAC-64 DAC are, in my view, landmark products that collectively represent a new benchmark - not just for other CD players, but for Compact Disc as a medium.

But could Chord pull off something equally spectacular with their Prima pre-amp and Mezzo power amp? I was intrigued to find out. If nothing else, it was going to be very interesting to return to a top-flight direct-coupled transistor amplifier once again, after having lived almost exclusively with transformer-coupled valve designs these past few years. I wasn't sure I could go back.

True, I had a brief but enjoyable 'affair' with the Consonance a-120 last month. But, that's a valve/transistor hybrid rather than an all transistor design. So it sort of doesn't count! Hopefully, living with Chord's Prima balanced line level pre-amp and Mezzo power amp, was going to be a rewarding and possibly enlightening experience. Early impressions were of a clear, sharp, lucid/detailed sort of sound - smooth and clean; immediate and crisply delineated. Not bad!

It was pretty much what I expected, really. But as time wore on, I realised the Prima/Mezzo had a bit more to offer than just speed and attack. It certainly is a fast amplifier - 'fast' in the sense of sounding focussed and purposeful. It projects the music in a very precise controlled manner. There's not an ounce of excess fat anywhere; everything's honed to perfection. Although one couldn't describe the presentation as

warm or beguiling, at the same time it's not dry or lacking in richness or weight.

Tonally, the sound is natural and correctly proportioned. You're able to hear lots of changes between individual tracks - distinct spatial and timbral differences - rather than having everything sound much the same. Although the overall presentation is crisp and lucid, the sound remains well-balanced; there's no sense of the treble leading the mid-range and bass. The top-end is smooth, clean, and seamlessly integrated - so much so, you hardly know it's there.

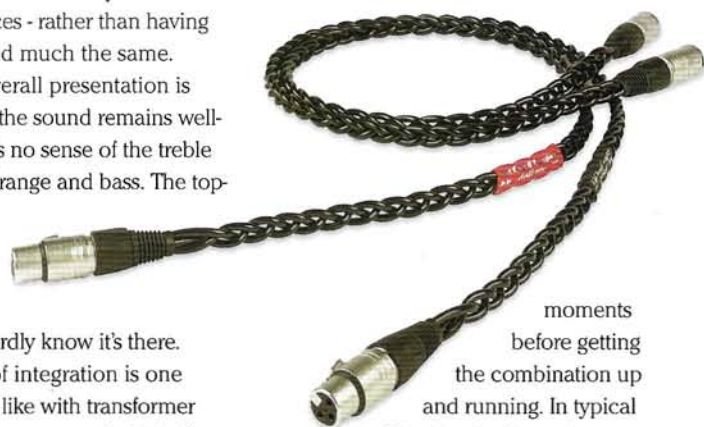
This sense of integration is one of the qualities I like with transformer coupled amplifiers - most of which (for obvious reasons) happen to use valves. Direct coupled transistor amplifiers tend to sound sharper and more immediate, but sometimes this leads to a bright and overly-forward treble. Certainly, the Prima/Mezzo 50 combination sounds tactile and immediate. But it's not overly bright. Bass is impressively solid and powerful - sometimes surprisingly so.

The lower frequencies have real weight, yet bass lines remain

agile and cleanly defined. Control is excellent, but the bass doesn't sound 'tight' or lean in terms of sonority. Mid-band is smooth and very liquid. There's something very believable about the way the Prima/Mezzo makes music. It's impressively neutral; truthful and accurate, adding/subtracting little or

nothing from the signal. This sort of presentation perfectly matches the qualities of Chord's Blu/DAC-64 combination.

Installation is fairly straightforward, but nevertheless I had a few anxious



moments before getting the combination up and running. In typical Chord style, the various

input/output sockets are not marked. Seeing a set of unbalanced phono inputs on the Mezzo power amplifier, I naively assumed the Prima pre-amp would have a corresponding set of unbalanced phono outputs. Alas it doesn't! So I spent a frustrating twenty minutes wondering why I wasn't getting any sound...

When I finally did get the amp working it was on one channel only - the remote control had reset the left/right balance. More frustration! But curiously this demonstrated something important about the Prima/Mezzo combination; its very precise imaging. With only the left loudspeaker working, the sound really located on the left-hand side of the room - like it was locked in place. There was no sense of the sound spreading - no impression of a pool of sound. Instead, it was hard over on the left.

When I finally got both channels working, it became apparent that the amp imaged exceptionally well. The soundstage was not excessively extended in terms of front-to-back



▶ depth, but it gave a believable sense of space and distance. Nor was it exceptionally 'out of the boxes' in terms of holographic height. Yet, on vinyl sources especially, there was at times a palpable impression of vertical imaging, and it was certainly vivid in terms of width, creating focussed detailed stereo.

Again, the impression was one of precision and control,



allied to an attractive unexaggerated naturalness. The overall impression was one of an outstandingly clean uncoloured sound. Very small details could be heard - say, delicate overtones on a quietly played solo flute or perhaps a subtle cymbal stroke - without seeming exaggerated or underlined. The fine detail comes through naturally without damaging the flow of the music.

The pre-amp's lack of unbalanced outputs caught me on the hop slightly. Luckily I had a set of XLR to phono cables that got the combination up and running. But I knew that using the amp this way (balanced Out to unbalanced In) was very much a compromise. Fortunately, the Chord Company (the Salisbury cable manufacturers) came up with a set of their balanced Anthem XLR to XLR cables, allowing the pre-amp and power amp to interface in balanced mode.

Big improvement. The Chord balanced cables made a difference in several crucial areas. There was an increase in volume level, plus greater cleanness and purity. Put simply,

everything I played just sounded truer and more natural. And it seemed to be getting better. With amp and cables nicely run-in, I really felt I was starting to hear the Prima/Mezzo combination at its best. Yes, the amp had sounded pretty good right from the off. But now all its many good points seemed to be enhanced.

A recently-purchased 2CD set of Karajan conducting famous overtures with the Berlin Philharmonic on Deutsche Grammophon really highlighted this. The recordings span about two decades - from the mid '60s to the early '80s, and are a mix of analogue and digital. I knew all the recordings from the original LPs, some of which had been in my record collection for almost thirty years. In particular, the '70s recordings, which enshrine Karajan and the Berliners at their incomparable peak. Alas, the recordings aren't easy to reproduce. The sound is spacious and detailed, but can be a touch thin and 'hard' tonally.



Specifically, the recordings from 1972/3/4 can (on unsympathetic equipment) paradoxically seem both forward and hard in climaxes, yet vague and recessed in the quiet passages. Writing in *Hi-Fi News* at the time, poor old Chris Breunig got into

big trouble with DG by saying the recordings were made in an acoustic suggesting a huge, empty, Luftwaffe aircraft hanger. Naughty...

So I was impressed to hear the Chord CD/DAC and pre/power amp reproduce these somewhat difficult recordings with consummate ease. All the individual characteristics came through, just as I remembered them from the original LPs. In retrospect DG were aiming for a very distinct and in some ways quite sophisticated sort of sonic presentation - spacious and atmospheric at middle and low levels, but crisp and detailed in climaxes. I recall the way these recordings sounded on the hi-fi equipment of the 1970s, and was gratified to hear modern technology doing such a good job. Always the strengths of the individual recordings were emphasised, not the weaknesses. And while the Blu CD transport and DAC 64 probably deserve the lion's share of any praise due, the Prima/Mezzo played an important part too, making sure the signal reached the speakers intact.

Owners of Chord's DAC-64 have a choice of using balanced or unbalanced cables when connecting up to the Prima. Using a set of unbalanced phono to phono cables is probably the easiest option, but for best results you should use balanced XLR cables. You'll get a bigger more dimensional sound, and increased subtlety and fine detail. In the case of the Chord electronics, there's always a big advantage with balanced connections - partly due to the outstanding rejection of common mode noise.

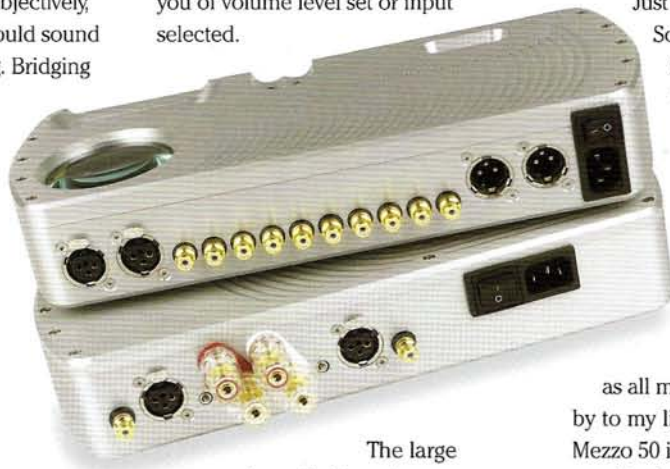
The Mezzo 50 power amp runs quite warm, and when first switched on a rather noisy cooling fan kicks in for a few seconds. Fortunately, the noise stops almost immediately, and I wrongly assumed the fan had switched off. But if you put your ear right up close you can just detect some fan noise. Some fan-cooled amplifiers are noisy; this one is virtually silent during normal use - ▶

▶ only if the amp got dangerously hot would the fan kick in hard... Subjectively the it sounds very powerful - more so than its specifications indicate. But if extra power is required it's possible to add a second Mezzo and use each amp bridged, increasing power output and improving sound quality. Subjectively, using two amps bridged should sound scads better than bi-amping. Bridging doubles the output power, but more importantly gives added weight and scale - the sound seems distinctly 'bigger', even at identical volume levels. (Not sure I agree with this, but Chord are supplying a second Mezzo, so we'll discover the truth in due course. Ed.)

The Mezzo is one of those strain-free amps that gives barely any indication of how hard it's working until you overstep its limits - then it distorts. Subjectively it's an amp you want to turn up loud because the sound is so clean and fresh - it encourages you to turn up the wick. Given loudspeakers of medium/high efficiency, it will produce very decent volume levels - certainly as loud as I would ever want or need - but clearly, power is not unlimited. Unusually, Chord provide the Mezzo 50 with individual phase switches for each channel. You'd make use of these switches when bridging of course - one channel is set negative to the other's positive. But the phase switches also allow you to experiment with positive/negative absolute phase - a useful feature seeing as Chord's DAC-64 has a phase-inverting output. Actually, I found the difference fairly subtle. But absolute phase is a subjective, system-dependant thing, so try it yourself and see.

The Prima is a balanced line-level pre-amp offering five line inputs (1 balanced, XLR; 4 unbalanced via phono sockets) and a set of balanced XLR outputs. Sensitivity is individually

adjustable for each input using a rather large and elaborate LCD remote handset. The pre-amp itself is a pretty simple 'minimalist' unit; volume and balance are set using rotary controls, while input and record out selection is via two press buttons. An illuminated display informs you of volume level set or input selected.



The large beautifully-made remote handset comes with its own 38 page instruction booklet - not a good sign! It offers comprehensive control for those with complete Chord systems, and can 'learn' commands from other remote handsets. To be honest I hardly used it, finding it somewhat complicated and not especially intuitive to navigate. You'd also use it in addition to the Blu's remote; so that means two remotes for the system, which seems a bit ungainly. Surprisingly, the pre-amp runs nearly as warm as the power amp. Actually, I shouldn't be that surprised really, as all Chord components generate a reasonable amount of heat. Both pre and power amp seem to need very little time to settle down; switched on from cold they're more or less optimum within five or ten minutes maximum. So there's not much point in leaving the items on all the time. Certainly, I'd never leave a power amp permanently switched on for fear it might go DC and burn out my speakers.

So - did the Chord Prima/Mezzo 50 change my prejudices on direct-coupled transistor amplifiers? Yes. It's certainly an amplifier I could live with. I love its

cleanness and neutrality, and at the same time find it very purposeful - capable of producing strong driving rhythms with plenty of power and presence. Despite its commanding presence, it's actually very neutral sounding amplifier; not warm, not cold.

Just natural and unexaggerated.

Sonically, it's an excellent match for Chord's Blu transport and DAC-64. Both amp and CD player highlight the other's strengths, producing an end result that's greater than the sum of the parts. I have reservations about the remote on a personal level, but then I rarely need to use such things as all my equipment is situated close by to my listening seat. The Prima/Mezzo 50 is an outstanding pre/power combination - one that looks and sounds great. Strongly recommended. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Prima Pre-amp

Type:	Solid-state line-stage
Inputs:	1x balanced XLR 4x unbalanced RCA phono
Input Impedance:	balanced unbalanced
Outputs:	1x balanced XLR 1x unbalanced tape
Output Impedance:	470 Ohms
Weight:	8Kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	338x60x145mm
Price:	£2850 (including remote)

Mezzo Power Amp

Type:	Class A/B solid-state power amplifier
Inputs:	1x balanced XLR 1x unbalanced RCA phono
Input Impedance:	100 kOhms
Outputs:	5-way binding posts
Rated Power:	50 Watts/8 Ohms
Weight:	8Kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	338x60x145mm
Price:	£1900

Manufacturer:

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